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ABSTRACT

Feminist literary criticism seems to have the potential to bring new life to old standards taught in the high school English class even if the students are not themselves feminists. A feminist approach to literature instruction was first attempted using "This Is Just to Say" and "The Young Housewife" by William Carlos Williams without having his name attached to the poems. The students discussed whether the poem's voice was masculine or feminine. The next effort at infusing feminist criticism into the classroom used Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Margaret Atwood's "There Must Be More for You to Do" and other poetry that tackled traditional archetypes of men and women. Current efforts to use feminist criticism involved Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," which focused on the elements of language and artistry as well as the influence of feminist criticism. The goal was to provide students with a clearly articulated feminist position on the play, beginning with the idea that this is not merely ill-fated, star-crossed love. While feminist literary criticism is promising for high school literature instruction, the form that it should take is an intriguing challenge in lesson design and refinement. (SRT)

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You Don't Have To Be:

Feminist Literary Criticsm in the High School

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YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE:

FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

John Willinsky / The University of Calgary

The title of this article is, of course, a play on the old advertising copy for rye bread which assured us of what almost everyone knew, that we didn't have to be Jewish to enjoy a pastrami on rye with a dill on the side. When I first began to pick up what could be identitified as feminist literary criticism to share with high school teachers, I found myself running into the disclaimer, on occasion, that they were not feminists, as though it were a cultural state like Judaism. While I may have converted, they implied, they had not. I first took this to indicate a simple lack of interest in my work. But since then I have realized that this may well be part of a manly problem which continues to mar my efforts with this topic.

That is, I now understand that the issues raised by feminism cut so close to the bone that many women and fewer men feel compelled to take a stand, to accept or deny its importance. This polarized reponse, both personal and political as the feminists have pointed out, has vastly complicated the introduction of these prespectives into the English curriculum. The questions that are raised in trying to bring to the high school English class the critical insights of a literary school, such as feminist literary criticism, are not, as I have repeatedly discovered, simply an act of technology transfer.

What we have instead is a questioning of who we are and of who we would be, in more than our teaching. While I originally thought that, as

with the matter of rye bread, so it was with gender and patriarchy, that is you didn't have to be . . . I now suspect that I underestimated the ontological forces at stake. The very issue with feminism is being, and the very thrust of feminist criticism is to bring this matter of being into question, this matter of being Juliet, being Evangeline, being S. E. Hinton. Yet before I seem to dwell too long on the philosophical dilemmas of putting forward a feminist program, I would introduce my experiences over the last three years with student teachers in English methods courses. Each year has produced more daring and involved curricular work, though in tracing this brief history I wish to portray the lessons learned as well as those taught, the distances to go as well as those traveled.

I was initially attracted to feminist literary criticism, to the work of Elizabeth Abel and Elaine Showalter, to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, by their claim to a just cause in language and literature, to the vigor of their close reading and their heated response to a prevalent state of tired, lazy injustice in the teaching of literature. In this way, feminist literary criticism's approach of raising the overlooked or over-determined woman, its realization of relationships among characters in a fresh, powerful way, promised to be just the thing to bring a new life into works taught all too confidently to students in high school English class. As feminist criticism took up what it meant to come of age as a woman or a man, it seemed to connect to the lives of the young which the high school surrounds and encumbers for many students. Feminist literary criticism was clearly a response to the old methods in a new way that might well stir and connect, and I suspected that it was

enough to find new ways to "only connect." Yet while these scholars were busy reshaping the academic discipline of English, considerably less appeared to be happening with this promise in the high school English class.

Our first connection in the high school English classroom worked in a primitive sort of way, yet it worked with poetry and a grade ten, non-academic class in the inexperienced hands of a student-teacher. In the study of poetry, feminist literary critics have recovered the legion of overlooked and underanthologized women who have written in verse at least since Queen Elizabeth I's "The Doubt of Future's Foes" (now found in the new Norton Anthology of Literature by Women); the feminist literary critics have also revived the Otherness of women who have been overwritten and buried alive in their perpetual status as muse, as solitary and unintelligible reapers in the thicket of men's poetry. The feminist literary critic has taken the indominatable urge to expression and the ineffable problem of representation in poetry, and brought it into the vital and comprehensible terms of who we would be and what we would make of others.

But this first instance was a little less ambitious. The student-teacher, Laurette Lavoie, with whom I had been working with these ideas, brought to the class which I witnessed this issue of identity on verse, an identity of expression which she at first hid from the students by presenting two poems without an author. Though the authorless poem happens on occasion in high schools, identity and form of expression less often become the issue. In this case, Laurette put before the students a copy of "This Is Just to Say" and "The Young Housewife" without reference

to William Carlos Williams. The students with poems in hand took up the issue of what sort of voice, masculine or feminine, was represented in this apology for wonderful plums eaten, despite the knowledge of the act's certain evil; they wrestled more intriguingly with the driver of a car passing over fallen leaves as a young housewife, hair and negligee undone, ventures out to the street to call the fishman.

They argued from stereotype, as mothers surely made breakfast--and I thought the lesson had faltered--and they countered with dexterous dads and the ambivalence of icebox crimes--and I realized a certain hope. With "The Young Housewife," some found in the poet's voice an expression of passing compassion for the housewife, or was it, others wondered, sexual desire. In the process, Laurette encouraged them to test out their speculations, as some considered whether a woman torn by leaving home to go to work would give this housewife a tod--"I bow and pass smiling"--or was the driving away of this woman and poet a sign of being free of it all. These students tended to bring far too modern sensibilities to the poem, but that was telling too. Others thought of a man contemplating another's wife as something like unguarded property--"behind / the wooden walls of her husband's house." With some coaxing, they built their case in the lay of the lines and haltingly wrote out their sense of what was at stake on paper.

Yet as you can imagine, the students became caught up with the game, with guessing of the poet's gender. Laurette's announcement of Williams' authorship brought the class's interest all too quickly to an end. They counted who had guessed right and who had missed. It closed off the opportunity of discussing how the attitudes of those readers who saw the

driver and poet as a women demonstrated real insight into how much things had changed since Williams wrote the poem over fifty years ago, and how those who realized the sense of impropriety and property in the poet's eyeing of this housewife were edging up to a feminist criticism of the traditions of power between women and men.

The premature closure the class suffered cut short an exploration of the changing range of personal expression and concern which the students had raised between the sexes and within a sense of sisterhood. As Laurette and I had been unprepared for this surprisng range of attitudes among the students toward the expectations and experiences of gender, we were left watching it pass. Undeniably, the lesson was a first. Yet it was a start.

The next effort came with another year of student-teachers. Based on our discussions in the English methods class, Kathy Patrick and Daniel Thorpe collaborated on a grade twelve "Poetry and Gender" unit. Unfortunately, this time I did not see it in action. After the practicum in which they developed it, they mailed me a package of fifteen lesson plans sprinkled with their students' poetic responses to it. On reading the unit, I realized that the unit worked from a mixture of their interests, of Jungian archetypes cut with a critical eye to gender, and it moved from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" to Margaret Atwood's "There Must Be More For You To Do." Kathy and Dan infused the unit with a certain humor and fearlessness. They provided students with their very own "Real Woman's Guide to Having Her Way with All Those Poems That Have Oppressed Her In the Past" which offered students the steps to happily thread their way through a poem, from "First Impressions (Make the First

Move)" and "Muscial Qualities (Can He Dance?)" to "Content, Subject, and Theme (Putting Him Back Together and Sending Him Home)."

The classic types were first drawn from the student's own experience, from Romeo and Juliet, fairy tales and "Miami Vice." The unit then confronted the students with tough readings of poems in which the archetypal tensions were realized in the helpmate ("shrew tamed"), the witch ("threatening vitality") and the virgin ("a purity of emptiness"). Yet against every type the students faced and read for, they were asked to bring their own experience, to distinguish fact from fiction, to determine how types influence the perception of men and women, and how current perceptions have felt the effect of changing times. Yet the unit also did more than gender. For example, in Owen Seman's "To Julia Under Lock and Key," they combined questions on diction and figures of speech with ones which asked to which archetype did Julia correspond--witch, sage, warrior or virgin.

Kathy and Dan sought poetry that spoke to and poetry that tackled the archetype. The tackling happened with poems such as Phyllis McGinley's "Portrait of a Girl with a Comic book" which begins

> Thirteen's no age at all. Thirteen is nothing.
> It is not wit, or powder on the face.
> Or Wedenesday matinees or misses clothing
> Or intellect or grace.

Students were asked to trace the dilemmas of self caught between ideals and the real while facing this awkward age, and finally they had to match and model it with their own "Portrait of a Boy."

In another lesson, they took Sylvia Plath's "The Moon and The Yew Tree" which contains the wonderfully lucid line "I simply cannot see where there is to get to." Their lesson plan for Plath picks and hints, if rather weakly, at her crumbling faith in Christianity--"How I would like to believe in tenderness"--even as it pursues Plath's opposition and challenge to it--"I have fallen a long way." The poet's pose of ancient sagaciousness becomes for the class a matter of appreciating a long lineage of literary wizards and fools. It ultimately concludes, in the lesson plan cryptic which they used: "Female sage more often than male a rebel because female's subservient position." Plath was certainly not one to be co-opted.

Yet the poetry which the grade twelve students wrote in response to this unit spoke to its limitations and to this need for more practice with it, to the need for increasing sensitivity and refinement. The heavy-handedness of the students' strained effort to make it poetry (color it purple--"the green trees bend their boughs to kiss purple flowers") gives the problem away, between those for whom the issue seems to have slipped by--"i can't write poems / i don't know why i try"--though the student may not have realized how closely she slipped by the issue of struggling for a voice, to others who would smack the reader hard with the hammer of conviction and little music "we condemn Hilter for how he treated the Jews / but is what you are doing any different?" It may not be exactly what we would hope for, but still the unit had demonstrated the real scope and sweep which feminist literary criticism could begin to introduce into the high school English classroom. It requires a closer attention to both the subtlety and the daringness of

this manner of expression marked by gender, but equally marked by the ambivalence and uncertainty of experience, all of which should seep into the students' work.

Another year passes and our current efforts are with Shakespeare. I had been vastly encouraged by Marianne Novy's observation that "it was Shakespeare women who embodied alternatives to the stereotyped images of women as ideally submissive or as decorative objects that we as adolescents met in most literature and popular culture." After consulting with the work of Novy on demythologizing Shakespeare, Marilyn French on Shakespeare's division of experience, and Irene Dash on the powerful individuality of the women in the play, we began to fashion a unit which has only this fall begun to find its way into the field for testing, this time, though, across three countries and with experienced teachers.

The work was another collaborative effort and, as circumstances had it, between two men. Jim Bedard and I developed an instructional unit for Romeo and Juliet entitled "'The Fearful Passage' in the High School"--"fearful," we thought, in terms of the students' first Shakespearean play, their own coming of age, and this feminist perspective. We modestly describe it in the subtitle as "Under the Influence of Feminist Literary Criticism." The unit begins with an introduction to the play which briefly compared it to Shakespeare's other tragedies. As we dramatized it: "This extraordinary drawing of Juliet, without the trappings of high office or noble marriage, leads to a struggle that is more often fought than the tales of kings, queens and

princes--the struggle of daughters and sons in a world that seems to conspire against them."

We opened with a teacher's guide to the themes of the play read in a feminist way. We took up love, as it is played against the women and as it dares to imprison Juliet ("Can you love this man," Juliet's mother asks her?) and as it is all she has to give away ("And yet I would it were to give again," Juliet teases Romeo). We took up the gender expectations, as women were to give themselves up in plays and life to marriage or death. And we took up the woman's part, as it served for mother and nurse the folies of the men and as it cracked, with Juliet, the traditional boundaries between the parts.

Coppelia Kahn, one of the critics who guided our work, contributed to the unit the ways in which feud serves the patriarchy as a rite de passage. Despite its personal cost, it is an opportunity for the men to make their mark upon each other and upon the women ("I will push Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall," Samson boasts in the first scene). Against this violent play at self-assertion, made so much a carnival in Zeffirelli's film production, we tried to recover Juliet's relentless courage and intelligence, her passion as heroics, her fencing off "the siege of loving terms" from Romeo, as well as from mother, father, nurse and Paris. We played this out, line by line with the balcony scene, in the second section of the unit, standing her against the grandiloquent Romeo ("O swear not by the moon," she admonishes him, "th'inconstant moon") and against what life afforded her even as she was the sun, the moon and the stars.

Yet taking Shakespeare on such a mission can trod much under foot. The first draft or two produced a unit so tuned to our feminist themes, that it was nearly deaf to the language of the play. We were aghast and went back into the essay and discussion questions until we could find some room for the twists of naming and telling language:

6. b. Keeping in mind that Shakespeare told everything with the turn of a phrase, compare what Romeo tells of his character to what Juliet reveals of herself in the balcony scene, with Friar Laurence, and in the crypt.

By the third or fourth draft, I realized that we had worked ourselves into such a state over Juliet, over the dilemmas of Lady Capulet and the Nurse, that we had mistaken them for life itself and not part of Shakespeare's artistic project. It was art that was nearly lost each time and artfulness we too easily "o'erperched." Again, we tried to make amends:

1. d. Consider whether Shakespeare has given different perspectives in love to servants and masters, to men and women. Speculate on why these particular differences might seem natural in the playwright's day and whether they seem so now.

I can still hear in these questions a certain awkwardness, a certain forced groping. We clearly have drafts to go before we sleep on this one. We have not thoroughly succeeded in restoring these elements of language and artistry to the twenty pages of the unit, and yet I believe this problem remains a common enough one to Shakespearean studies. We so trust the wonder of Shakespeare's realization of character, plot and

theme, that we argue them as given and build our house upon their seeming firmness.

But let me report, too, on where the unit has failed the feminist critic, or at least one thoughtful critic. One teacher, Kally Krilly, has given it a closer reading than anyone thus far and it did not stand her test well. Though I may not do her views justice, and I may seem too defensive, they need to be heard and considered. Kally found the unit seriously flawed by a failure of will, a failure in its intention; she felt that it has a most tenuous claim on feminism. The unit does not teach feminism, she declared, and her first instance was the fact that it does not tackle Juliet's failure as a feminist.

Certainly, the subtitle flinches--"Under the Influence" rather than declaring something more fully committed--and at various other points we had bowed to the "But I'm not a feminist" response that we had met by diluting views, by dropping, for example, the language of patriarchy from among our themes. In the discussion and essay questions for the students, we introduce this approach as a "new kind of attention . . . concerned with the relationships between men and women which Shakespeare works with such vividness" finally arriving at, by question number seven, "The long and formal name for the thrust of these questions is 'feminist literary criticism.'" While we would not hide our perspective, there are clearly questions and classroom activities in which the feminist perspective slips from sight. And we recognize now that at those points the unit becomes simply old hat.

Kally also charged that the unit failed to connect adequately with the world of both changing values which the students face. We had found

that feminist literary criticism of Shakespeare was highly academic, strongly text-centred, and the unit reflects that perspective. However, we had, perhaps too much as a token, appended to each theme, to the classroom activities and the discussion questions, the connections which might be made to modern times: "Compare what the youth of Verona faced in coming of age to what the young today understand to be the hurdles of their times." Yet we were not tough enough or focused enough, in Kally's eyes, as we repeatedly failed to confront the current and serious state of naming and possession, of marriage and dependency, of teenage suicide, and of women and war. And as I now see it, we had flinched from the seriousness of the play, from the nature of the adolescent dilemma then and now. At this point, we look forward to giving it another intrepid try, with less bravado and more courage.

As I now see it, we have to provide the students with a clearly articulated feminist position on the play, one that begins with the idea that this is not merely ill-fated, star-crossed love. We have to provide students with the structures and focus, by character and by line, which address both the heady forces and the subtle artfulness at work in the play. Students can then find support for, or the challenge to, this particular reading of the text or of their lives. Against the obvious charge of how dare we present such a single-sided view of this great play, we respond with another feminist lesson we have learned. The imagined neutral, objective teaching of the bard which others may claim to be conducting in their classes has in fact no greater claim on integrity or exhaustiveness in its reading of the play.

I have turned to feminist literary criticism as a means of refreshing and enlivening the level of critical discourse in the English classroom. Working with English education students, I have learned a good deal from the instances of Laurette's lesson with the identities in William's poetry, Kathy and Dan's archetypal reading of poetic history, and, finally, our recent "Fearful Passage." I am considerably more cautious about the degree to which this work serves or abuses feminist literary criticism, and about what it have does for the students and the literature in the process. While I remain convinced of its promise in opening literature for the students, the forms for that opening offer an intriquing challenge in lesson design and refinement. I leave it before you, as I carry it away with me, to consider this matter of what you do have to be and what it takes to move the English curriculum into such critical and promising areas of contemporary thought about language, literature and life.

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